

# From the Reich to the Republic

The Spanish Civil War and the German Antifascist Movement,  
1936-1939

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Undergraduate Research Thesis

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# Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Berlin and Madrid in Solidarity: Understanding the German-Spanish Relationship, 1936-1939	7
III. Transplants in the Transnational War: The Birth of a Niche Community in the International Brigades	20
IV. The United Party: The Popular Front from Below	35
V. Epilogue	50
Bibliography	54

# I. Introduction

In the summer of 1936, Karl Hoetzel made up his mind. He gathered his belongings, left his German hometown, and joined his friend aboard a train to the Saarland territory, where they would illegally make their way to French Alsace-Lorraine. After visiting his relatives there, Hoetzel continued on to Metz, then to Toulouse, where he and his friend connected with an old antifascist acquaintance and informed him of their plan. In the next few days, the three of them would cross over the Pyrenees and into Spain. They would need to be careful—talk of the Spanish war filled the air in France, leading guards to keep a tight watch over the border. Moreover, hostile anarcho-syndicalists controlled the Spanish borderland. Arriving in the southern town of Perpignan, the group split up so as not to attract attention. Finally, they hiked through rocky mountain passes and into Spanish territory. For the next two years, Hoetzel was exactly where he felt he needed to be. “As a German antifascist who had experienced fascism firsthand, it was clear to me that Spain’s cause was my cause.”<sup>1</sup>

Karl Hoetzel was one of many foreign antifascists who left his home to fight for the Spanish Republic. Like his peers in Germany, he had been following the events in Spain through the illegal antifascist press. When Spain’s newly elected left-wing government, the *Frente Popular*, was threatened by Francisco Franco’s fascist uprising in 1936, Hoetzel resolved to take up arms in defense of democracy. He and his comrades were not alone. By the end of the war, roughly 59,000 antifascists had joined the defense.

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<sup>1</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237 13/ 207: *Erlebnisberichte von in der DDR lebenden Spanienkämpfern nach Veröffentlichung des Appells der Sektion ehemaliger Spanienkämpfer*, “Hoetzel, Karl,” p. 65. All primary and secondary source translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Among the large number of international fighters, roughly 2,800 Germans fled the Reich to play an active role in the war against Franco and his benefactor: Adolf Hitler. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD), the largest communist party outside of the Soviet Union, refocused its resistance operations on the Spanish war front. German communists, social democrats, and anarchists alike found an active community of antifascists that continued to develop in Spain throughout the war. On the front lines of the Spanish Civil War, German antifascists were no longer the suppressed minority that they were at home. Some Germans arrived in Spain early enough to join the existing community of German exiles, while others came after the formation of the International Brigades—an organization of Republican militias that drew support from volunteers across the globe. Altogether, German-speaking volunteers made up the second-largest troupe of foreign fighters, behind only their French counterparts.

When Hoetzel arrived in Spain in late August 1936, the conflict had begun so recently that he and his peers received only half of a uniform each. But already, he could see that the Germans who joined the Spanish Civil War came from various backgrounds. Most of the volunteers were communists, though many were registered social democrats and some anarchists. A substantial minority of the volunteers were Jewish.<sup>2</sup> Some of them had been trained militarily, either through service in the First World War or in communist militias, but many were simply untrained anti-Nazi ideologues. Regardless of their background, their conviction that the Spanish Civil War was an integral step in their own struggle was the common thread linking the soldiers together.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of Jewish members of the International Brigades, see Arno Lustiger, *Schalom Libertad!: Juden im spanischen Bürgerkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1989).

The unique importance of the Spanish Civil War to the German volunteers is often overlooked. To them, the war's result bore significant consequences on their own struggle of resistance. Whereas other countries had not yet felt the impact of fascism, German communists and socialists were among the Nazis' first political prisoners and exiles. Other foreign volunteers could often retreat to their homes, but Germans in exile could not return to their country. Additionally, the hopeful Germans rallied behind the war as proof that a popular antifascist front could emerge against Nazism. While many other foreigners fought for their ideals in Spain, Germans fought for their future.

From the very beginning, it was clear that the three-year war was a precursor to wider global turmoil. New international political movements clashed in a largely agrarian and relatively isolated country. Neither the *Frente Popular*, a coalition of leftist parties that had won the 1936 Spanish elections, nor Francisco Franco and the Nationalists were satisfied with the existing political system of the Spanish Republic.<sup>3</sup> While the *Frente Popular* had its eyes set on revolution, the fascist Nationalists blamed the fall of the Spanish monarchy for the political chaos plaguing the country. Both sides were weak on their own and thus tied their causes to their international allies. Franco found early support from Mussolini and Hitler. The Republican government relied on the Communist International—a Stalinist association of communist parties that alleged to advance world communism, but primarily sought to maintain Soviet control over the international communist movement. The Communist International (Comintern) established the International Brigades in conjunction with the *Frente Popular* to recruit and organize foreign fighters for Europe's first major conflict since the First World War. Individuals of all social

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<sup>3</sup> R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p. 3.

classes and professions uprooted their lives to turn the tide against European fascism by enlisting in the Brigades. Among them were many authors, poets, journalists, and others who immortalized their experiences through writing.

Its association with literature has kept the Spanish Civil War a highly romanticized topic. Books written by foreign soldiers of the International Brigades cement the war's place in historical memory as a battle of good versus evil, of freedom versus oppression. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* are two famous examples that idolize the international solidarity which came to characterize the war. In former socialist countries, the war held an important status as a defense of the first leftist popular-front government. Its internationalism and its significance in the history of popular-front politics played an important role in the memory of the war. In the GDR, German volunteers were remembered as *Spanienkämpfer* ("Spain fighters"). Many of them went on to serve official roles in the East German government.<sup>4</sup> Cities erected monuments to the *Spanienkämpfer*, and some were considered important enough for their faces to appear on government stamps.

This work examines a lesser-told side of German involvement in the Spanish Civil War. While the existing literature tends to focus on the German government's role in the war, the intersection of the two countries' antifascist resistance efforts raises interesting questions in its own right. As I discuss in the following chapter, some scholars have studied this topic in recent years. The following pages, however, reframe the topic. Rather than examining the role that German antifascists played in the Spanish Civil War, this thesis discusses the role that the war played on German antifascism. In doing so, it aims to build upon the literature on the German

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<sup>4</sup> A prominent example among these is Walter Ulbricht, the second East German head of state.

left in the Spanish Civil War, which has evolved into a far more meticulous and holistic field in recent decades owing to the opening of former East German archives. More broadly, this work provides a nuanced alternative to the literature on German antifascism during the period of National Socialism, which often neglects the ‘bottom’ of the political hierarchy.

There is still work to be done on this topic. Due to time constraints in the archives, this thesis examines the top-down aspect only from the perspective of the KPD. Even though the KPD played a much more active role in the Spanish Civil War than the Social Democratic Party (SPD), both perspectives are valuable in understanding the development of the united antifascist front in the context of the International Brigades. Furthermore, important stories from individuals are scattered throughout archives in Germany. This analysis draws from published memoirs as well as unpublished accounts at the Bundesarchiv, Germany’s national archives. Some additional sources from the Berlin State Archive are also used. However, smaller and more local archives throughout Germany’s sixteen federal states hold interesting and informative stories that could not be used in this thesis. It is also worth noting that, in many of these cases, there is little or no available information about the individuals providing their accounts. However, their stories are still important to consider when looking at the everyday experiences in the International Brigades.

Finally, the stigma associated with the word ‘resistance’ in the discourse on Nazi Germany merits a brief discussion in the context of this thesis. In a review of Detlev Peukert’s *Die KPD im Widerstand (The KPD in Resistance)*, Albert Lindemann begins with an informative, if biting summary of the ethical problem tied to the word:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Detlev Peukert, *Die KPD im Widerstand: Verfolgung und Untergrundarbeit an Rhein und Ruhr 1933 bis 1945* (Wuppertal: Hammer, 1980).

[The book] deals with a subject, the resistance to Nazism inside Germany, that was at best a feeble affair and that in some of its better-known forms, whether right or left wing, was not particularly inspiring or attractive, especially to non-Germans. And it failed overwhelmingly. Yet here is a tome of some 460 pages (and no index) admirably devoted to anti-Nazi resistance in a single region of Germany and within a party whose most characteristic attitude of resistance was to wait until the Nazis destroyed themselves and, that failing, to lie low.<sup>6</sup>

Any study of German resistance should note that, relative to the scale of inaction against the Nazi regime, resistance was scarce. To be sure, even where anti-Nazi sentiment existed, it did not necessarily preclude anti-Semitism, a toxic xenophobia that permeated nearly all spheres of German life. One should not distort historical reality by envisioning a well-organized, large-scale struggle against the regime.

This thesis does not glorify the resistance movement within Germany as a powerful obstacle to Nazism. Instead, it aims to shed light on one overlooked display of antifascist resistance—the participation of German political émigrés in the Spanish Civil War. To use Lindemann’s word, anti-Nazi resistance was undoubtedly feeble within German borders. However, the German political exiles established a new center of German antifascism on the front lines of the Spanish war. The above characterization of the KPD’s resistance also reflects the deficiencies of a purely top-down approach to political history. It is true that, at the executive level, the German left allowed lingering rivalries to block their unity in opposition to Nazism. However, as this thesis explores, activity at the parties’ top levels did not always mirror the popular sentiment felt by German antifascists. On the whole, the resistance movement was not well executed, nor was it successful—but instances of resistance should not be ignored.

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<sup>6</sup> Albert S. Lindemann, “Die KPD Im Widerstand (Book Review)” in *American Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (1982), p. 205.



## II. Berlin and Madrid in Solidarity

### *Understanding the German-Spanish Relationship, 1936-1939*

Despite its name, the Spanish Civil War reached far beyond the limits of a civil war. Though it took place entirely within the country's borders, it was unprecedented in its level of grassroots foreign involvement. As the first country to formally descend into war between left and right factions, the important implications of Spain's future were apparent to foreigners comprising the entire political spectrum. Franco's rebellion enjoyed Hitler's and Mussolini's military support in an early display of international fascist solidarity, and the communist parties of Europe staked their ground as defenders of democracy in the face of right-wing dictatorship. It was in this context that the International Brigades formed and became a centerpiece of the resistance movement in Spain. Drawing on the support of volunteers from across the planet, the International Brigades turned a coup against the Spanish government into a global conflict.

Although the literature on the International Brigades often portrays the fight in Spain as one between the international left and right, both the German right and the various factions of the left quickly recognized the importance of the events in Spain to their respective national causes.<sup>7</sup> The former narrative is certainly important; the Spanish Civil War was indeed a proxy war between the left and right, between the European fascist superpowers and the international communist movement. However, this narrative often overshadows the significance of the war

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<sup>7</sup> See: Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

from the perspective of specific *national* participants who were fighting in their own political interests.

When examined through this framework, it becomes apparent that the Spanish Civil War played an important role in the German left's struggle against its own government. The international reach of Stalin and the Communist International cannot be neglected. But Spain represented a more immediate opportunity than the global Bolshevik revolution that those groups had envisioned. The German left, like the Nazi regime, recognized the importance of the war for its political causes. Altogether, by looking at both the KPD leadership and those volunteering in Spain themselves, the German defense of the Spanish Republic stands out from the narratives that often dominate the discourse on the International Brigades. To illustrate the role of the Spanish Civil War in German antifascism, this thesis frames the story of the *Spanienkämpfer* through the unique lens of German resistance.

Before analyzing the relationship between the German resistance and the Spanish Civil War, this chapter provides a brief overview of the war and its domestic importance to German antifascists. It then includes a short historiographical review that aims to situate this study among broader scholarship, both on the German International Brigades specifically and on German antifascist resistance.

## ***Germany and the Spanish Civil War***

### **Hitler's Gamble in Spain**

Hitler's interest in Spain was complicated. He had already established friendly relations with other fascist leaders, most notably Mussolini, but he had not even known of Emilio Mola,

Francisco Franco, or Spain's Falangist fringe prior to July 1936.<sup>8</sup> While Italy seemed like a logical political ally, there was almost nothing inherently obvious about the relationship between Spain and Germany. Hitler was largely unfamiliar with Spanish politics, loathed the Catholic Church,<sup>9</sup> and did not regard early 20<sup>th</sup> century Spain as a major European power.<sup>10</sup> After the election of the left-wing *Frente Popular* to Spain's parliament in February 1936, the Spanish left had a far higher international profile than the right. The European communists were more focused on Spain than their fascist counterparts for precisely this reason.

It is possible that this wave of antifascist excitement itself motivated Hitler to intervene in Spain. Because the Comintern and other international leftist circles celebrated the Spanish election, some historians have argued that Hitler's interest in Spain was reactionary and deeply rooted in symbolic victory over world communism.<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, Hitler's particular motive in the country is difficult to justify given the risk of prematurely provoking instability and allotting substantial resources to a foreign cause. This was especially true considering his domestic and international vulnerabilities.

Hitler's motivations likely also had more tangible ambitions. Firstly, with plans to invade France, he envisioned the strategic edge of wedging the French between his own army and that of a sympathetic (or indebted) collaborator. Hitler did not expect a fascist Spain to wage an all-out war against France. But even if it simply turned a blind eye to a German invasion, he would still be at an advantage. A calculated military intervention in Spain would come with another

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *Franco and Hitler: Spain, Germany, and World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Hitler similarly overlooked his abhorrence of Catholicism in his strategic alliance with Mussolini, whose fascist government placed great value on the Church.

<sup>10</sup> Payne, 22.

<sup>11</sup> On Nazi Germany's motivations in the Spanish Civil War, see Robert H. Whealy, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989); and Manfred Merkes "Die deutsche Politik gegenüber dem Spanischen Bürgerkrieg, 1936-1939" (Dissertation, L. Röhrscheid, 1961).

wartime benefit: the chance to prepare for a full-scale war, far from Germany and likely with minimal consequences.

Hitler did not predict the war to rage on for three years, but he found a sinister tactical advantage in dragging it out: distraction. Despite Germany's military support, Hitler consistently refused to openly engage politically with the Spanish Nationalists. Instead, he deliberately left official state engagement to Mussolini, who gave political counsel and demonstrated heightened commitment to the Nationalists. Memos seized from the German Navy High Command outline Hitler's prolonged distraction policy in Spain, making clear the Nazis' desire to "occupy Europe's attention and therefore divert it from Germany."<sup>12</sup> Hitler was careful not to overplay his involvement in Spain. Instead, he preferred to quietly reap the economic benefits of his arrangement.<sup>13</sup> The German policy, unlike Italy's, was self-interested and distant. In one instance, German officials even attempted a secretive diplomatic ploy to prevent Franco from easily capturing Catalonia, one of the Republican army's last major strongholds. A communist Catalonia would have allied with France against a fascist Spain. Such a move would pit France against Spain, and would therefore incentivize Spain to support a German invasion of its northern neighbor.<sup>14</sup> Hitler thus attempted to sabotage his ally in order to manipulate the geopolitical landscape. Unlike Mussolini's Italy, which aimed to position Spain into its sphere of influence, Nazi Germany opted to sustain the civil war as a decoy, diverting international attention away from its most damning endeavors—rearmament, annexation, and invasion.

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<sup>12</sup> Whealey, 54.

<sup>13</sup> See Christian Leitz, *Economic Relations between Nazi Germany and Franco's Spain, 1936-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Whealey, 60.

### German Antifascists Respond

German antifascists were aware not only of Hitler's nominal support of the Nationalist rebellion, but also of his military support and his larger intent. Seeing the implications for their own homeland, writers for the German antifascist press emphasized the role that *Spanienkämpfer* played in the German resistance movement. The official newspaper of the XI Brigade, *Pasaremos*, frequently published material connecting the struggles in Germany and Spain. Though the International Brigades are often considered in the context of global communism, *Pasaremos* emphasized fighting the Nazi regime as more important than the global communist ideal. In many instances, it presented the civil war as a continuation of the resistance work that communists had undertaken in the Reich. It consistently stressed that victory in Spain was imperative to antifascist success in Germany, and that Nationalist forces were, in fact, agents of Hitler. As one article explained:

Hitler and Mussolini, the promoters of the war, are in need of military success due to the situation they created. That is why they needed to put the Italian divisions into action in Spain while talks continued in London. So began the open imperialist war of Hitler and Mussolini, the war of regular fascist armies against the Spanish people, against their liberty and independence. But our front has also broadened. Today, we fight not only before the gates of Madrid, our guns, our cannons are now aimed at the centers of fascism, at Rome and Berlin.<sup>15</sup>

The article is typical of reporting directed toward the *Spanienkämpfer*. Its message centers on the relevance of Spain to the domestic resistance against Hitler, and it attributes the war to his and Mussolini's aggressive military policies. Articles like this one affirmed the practicality of fighting in Spain and augmented morale. The methods of internal resistance were completely underground, largely unorganized, and generally unimpactful. To German antifascists, the

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<sup>15</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237/ 11/ 152, "Pasaremos 5."

International Brigades were inherently tied to the future of their own home. Their service in the Brigades offered a greater promise of success than resistance efforts within the Reich's borders.

Fritz Rettmann, a volunteer who later moved to the GDR, expressed in his recollections of the war that he felt he was fighting for Germany. "If fascism were defeated in Spain, that would also weaken German fascism and mean better conditions for the antifascist struggle in Germany."<sup>16</sup> Rettmann also indicated that he and his peers followed the war's unfolding closely, using it as a lesson for Germany's resistance movement. "It was all passionately discussed by us every day...we eagerly read everything published about [the war]. We were especially interested in the implementation of the idea of the popular front in Spanish practical life. The Spanish example of a popular front was indeed a lesson for us."<sup>17</sup> Rettmann's characterization of the civil war as a matter of domestic importance demonstrates how volunteers saw their presence as a continuation of domestic resistance methods. They wanted to directly transfer the things they experienced in Spain back to Germany.

The domestic importance of the Spanish Civil War to the broader anti-Nazi community is perhaps best evidenced by the German International Brigades' bipartisan nature. Although most were affiliated with the KPD, there was a strong effort to form a coalition with the SPD, as the fourth chapter will expand upon. Scholars have put forth differing estimates on the political makeup of German volunteers in the International Brigades, but estimates for the percentage of social democrats in the Brigades ranges from four to fifteen percent.<sup>18</sup> One known sample,

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<sup>16</sup> C Rep. 902-02-02 (Nr. 92), "Schriftenreihe zur FDJ (20) (1979)," p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> The number of German soldiers in the International Brigades is estimated at roughly 2,300. Mallmann estimates that about 300 were social democrats, while zur Mühlen places the number at 100. Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Wilfried Loth, *Kommunisten in Der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte Einer Revolutionären Bewegung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996). Patrik von zur Mühlen, *Spanien war ihre Hoffnung: die deutsche Linke im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg, 1936 bis 1939* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1983).

conducted by Klaus-Michael Mallmann, found that about fourteen percent of volunteers from the German Saarland territory were social democrats, but this number could be misleading given that the Saarland was a rare example of effective KPD and SPD cooperation.<sup>19</sup> For German antifascists, fighting in Spain was directly linked to the German resistance movement as it meant fighting Hitler as directly as possible.

### ***German Antifascist Resistance: Problems and Progress in Historiography***

#### ***The Historiographical Evolution of the German International Brigades***

Above are two narratives of the German presence in the Spanish Civil War: one of the Nazi regime's involvement and one of the left's subsequent intervention. Though both sides of the Spanish-German relationship are tied to one another, one receives greater attention—both in historical memory and in scholarship. Most literature on German involvement in Spain is told from the top-down. As such, the perspectives of the Nazi regime and its Spanish ally play a larger role in historiography than those of the exiled parties and volunteer soldiers. By telling the story of the German left's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, this thesis aims to provide an alternative narrative. To do so, it bridges two related fields of scholarship. It draws from the extensive literature on prewar German communism and builds upon the research that historians have conducted on the German International Brigades.

In the vast scholarship on the internationalism of the Spanish Civil War, a relatively small portion centers specifically on the role that Germans played, despite the fact that German

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<sup>19</sup> Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik*; Josie McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades, 1945-1989* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 18.

volunteers likely made up about eight percent of the International Brigades.<sup>20</sup> In much of this literature, the relationship between Hitler and Franco tends to shadow the experience of the German left and its resistance against those two forces. However, this juxtaposition is what makes Germany's case during the Spanish Civil War so unique. While the governing Nazi regime was the predominant sponsor of Franco's rebellion, Germans also comprised the second-largest group in the International Brigades, behind only the French volunteers.<sup>21</sup>

For decades after the war's end, those curious about Germans in the International Brigades could find little in the way of academic research. After Germany's division into the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic, scholars had limited access to East German archives, where almost all of the material on the KPD and the Spanish Civil War was housed. Additionally, the bulk of the literature on the *Spanienkämpfer* was written by *Spanienkämpfer* themselves. These memoirs, mostly published in East Germany, became a kind of genre of their own. Autobiographies reflecting on the Spanish Civil War, like that of Gustav Szinda, Willi Bredel, and other influential GDR politicians, played an important role in the memory of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>22</sup> Many authors from around the world took part in the International Brigades, including Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and Pablo Neruda.<sup>23</sup> Because of the considerable presence of writers, memoirs and novels recalling the culture of international solidarity and belief in democracy helped to cement the war's romanticized place in memory as an international battle of good versus evil. The culture of the International Brigades also reached

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<sup>20</sup> Josie McLellan, "I Wanted to Be a Little Lenin': Ideology and the German International Brigade Volunteers," in the *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): pp. 287-288.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gustav Szinda, *Die XI. Brigade* (Berlin: Verlag des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung, 1956); Willi Bredel, *Spanienkrieg: Zur Geschichte Der 11. Internationale Brigade* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1986).

On the role of authors in the German International Brigades, see Wilfried F. Schoeller, *Die Kinder Von Guernica: Deutsche Schriftsteller Zum Spanischen Bürgerkrieg: Reportagen, Erinnerungen, Kommentare* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Zur Mühlen, 138.



beyond the literary realm. The songs of the Spanish Civil War continued to hold an esteemed place, particularly in the communist countries, as homages to the war. Some of them were written by well-known German writers like Bertolt Brecht and Paul Dessau and later became well-known antifascist anthems. Though scholarship on German antifascists in Spain may have been sparse, the memory of resistance remained alive through the stories told and sung by surviving *Spanienkämpfer* long after their return home.<sup>24</sup>

In the eight decades since the Spanish Civil War's end, German authors have sought to refine the historical literature on the subject. Until the consolidation of German archives after the fall of the GDR, significant research was hampered. But owing to increased accessibility to Spanish archives in the early 1980s, West German historian Patrik von zur Mühlen was able to publish the most comprehensive study on the Spanish Civil War from a German antifascist perspective to date. *Spanien war ihre Hoffnung (Spain was their Hope)*, published in 1983, tackled the subject from a largely thematic angle, giving political and cultural context to shed light on the German experience. Zur Mühlen's book combined data-driven demographic study, autobiographical literature, and research from Spanish archives to provide a thorough investigation of the *Spanienkämpfer*.

Since then, the only lengthy analysis of the topic has been Ralf Niemeyer's 2001 masters' dissertation from the University of Hamburg, *Die KPD und der Spanische Bürgerkrieg 1936-1939* ("The KPD and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939").<sup>25</sup> Whereas zur Mühlen's book covers the broader German left in the Spanish Civil War—communists, social democrats, and anarchists—Niemeyer's dissertation narrows its analysis to the KPD. And, while the former at times reads like a work of social and cultural history (and at times like military history), the latter

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<sup>24</sup> Ernst Busch, *Lieder Der Internationalen Brigaden* (Kiel: Rotfront-Verlag, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> Ralf Niemeyer, "Die KPD und der Spanische Bürgerkrieg 1936-1939" (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2001).

falls unquestionably in the realm of political history. After establishing the context of the KPD during the 1930s, Niemeyer highlights the party organization's influence on political relationships, media, and propaganda throughout the war. Both books, however, reflect a better understanding of the importance of the Spanish war to domestic German resistance politics.

These two authors have laid the groundwork for more nuanced, concentrated studies on the German International Brigades, which, since 1989, has allowed for a wider range of perspectives. Using a similar methodology as zur Mühlen, Arno Lustiger's 1989 *Schalom Libertad!* looks at the presence of Jews fighting in the International Brigades, many of whom came from Germany and Austria. Reflecting the social and cultural emphasis characteristic of *Spanien war ihre Hoffnung*, Anna Goppel's 2003 article analyzes the experience and motivations of German women who volunteered in Spain.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, Alejandro Andreassi Cieri's 2014 article in *Hispania* draws from Niemeyer's politically-focused work as it analyzes the Spanish Civil War's role on the exiled KPD and prospect of an antifascist popular front.<sup>27</sup> Altogether, the use of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to this subject has broadened the scope of the literature, making it more thorough and allowing for a wider range of nuanced perspectives. This thesis employs a similar methodology and draws from these works to balance the narrative between party and individual perspectives.

### *A Historiographical Review of Prewar German Communism*

This thesis draws extensively from the scholarship of pre-WWII German communism and lends itself to a brief literature discussion. It is impossible to make a single, broad

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<sup>26</sup> Anna Goppel, "Fighting Fascism: German and Austrian Women in the Spanish Civil War 1936-39," in the *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2003): 1-76.

<sup>27</sup> Alejandro Andreassi Cieri, "El KPD en la Guerra Civil Española y la Cuestión del Frente Popular: Algunas Reflexiones" in *Hispania - Revista Española De Historia* 74 (246) (2014): 177-204.

characterization of the scholarship on German communism. Some of the divisions in this field result from the differing perspectives between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ historians before 1989, when fundamental differences in methodology and perspective influenced the findings of scholars. The often-conflicting impressions of top-down and bottom-up histories further divide the literature. Norman LaPorte explains that “during the 1970s, a wave of ‘histories from below’ placed the dynamic of the KPD’s *policy-making* decisions firmly within the German context...”<sup>28</sup> Since then, the narrative of German communism has been changing to accommodate the divergent perspectives that resulted from the Cold War period and differing methodologies.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of archives in the former East, historians have conducted a flurry of research on German communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The emphasis on East Germany in scholarship on German communism is understandable. To many watching from the other side of the “Iron Curtain”, and perhaps even more so after its collapse, the GDR was shrouded in a post-apocalyptic air and known for surveillance, brutality, and deprivation. As such, the legacy of German communism is easily associated with such themes, both in popular culture and in scholarship. However, this perception of the country’s relationship with the radical left neglects an important tradition of German communism, one deeply rooted in the revolutionary thinking of the Weimar Republic and tied inextricably to the insidious rise of Nazism.

Two lengthy studies on the subject emerged in the years following the end of the GDR: E.D. Weitz’s *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protest to Socialist State* and Mallmann’s *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer*

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<sup>28</sup> Norman H LaPorte, “‘Stalinization’ and its Limits in the Saxon KPD, 1925-28” in *European History Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2001): 549–90, p. 550.

*Revolutionärer Bewegung*.<sup>29</sup> Weitz's book straddles the line between provocative 'bottom-up historians' and traditional top-down analyses. However, Mallmann's work is more characteristic of the former. His bottom-up analysis of the KPD appears throughout this thesis to introduce a nuanced narrative of the German resistance in the Spanish Civil War, and his concept of a "niche community" receives lengthy attention in the following chapter.

Mallmann's analysis of the KPD's reliance on the Comintern takes a domestic, on-the-ground approach. His research is based on local experiences of German communists and rejects the Western model of communist history in which the Soviet communist party apparatus in Moscow controlled all communist parties. Mallmann stresses that the literature on the communist party is skewed toward top-down studies, and that it is equally important to consider the hundreds of thousands of KPD members who experienced the party as it affected their lives. He argues that there was a rift between what the party leadership and the party's members experienced. To support this claim, he examined memoirs and data, mostly from the Saarland, about the changes that occurred within the KPD. This thesis builds upon Mallmann's work, arguing that what transpired at the executive level was not always representative of the bottom-up experience of the German left.

Based on both Weitz's and Mallmann's work, it is clear that attitudes on the subject of prewar German communism have shifted due to Western and Soviet-influenced studies merging as archives consolidated. Still, the question of methodology remains relevant and has implications on the KPD's activities abroad. Mallmann's reading of KPD history is particularly

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<sup>29</sup> Eric D Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

relevant to this study, as it uses sources and perspectives from below to challenge what a top-down analysis would suggest.

The literature on this topic uses different methodologies and perspectives to analyze German resistance. While some historians choose to approach the subject of the German International Brigades from a political point of view, other texts read more like a social or cultural history. Moreover, there are important divisions within the literature on German communism and anti-Nazi resistance that reflect the differences between top-down and bottom-up narratives. The following chapters endeavor to incorporate both the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’ to provide a holistic understanding of the *Spanienkämpfer* as an integral part of German resistance. To do so, I draw from sources at the KPD’s executive level and accounts from German volunteers. As the next chapter demonstrates, these sources are useful in understanding the effects that the antifascist community in Spain had on identity-formation and party revitalization among the German left.

### III. Transplants in the Transnational War

#### *The Birth of a Niche Community in the International Brigades*

The situation in 1936 seemed dire for German antifascists. Hitler's steady centralization of power and continued roundup of suspected political enemies led to doubt as to whether a united front against the Nazis could arise. The KPD leadership, now based in Paris, had relatively little contact with the Prague-based SPD, and the 1935 attempt at establishing a popular front in Paris was unsuccessful. The Spanish Civil War provided a space for the various factions of the German left to group together and organize more thoroughly than they could previously. The milieu that arose in Spain influenced the identity formation of the German left at a time when it lacked community elsewhere in Europe.

This chapter refocuses the analysis of the war's influence on the German left. It contributes to a gap in existing English-language literature, which centrally analyzes the German left's involvement solely from international viewpoints—whether through the lens of the Comintern or the International Brigades. In order to understand the Spanish Civil War in the German context it is important to consider the perspectives of both the KPD leadership and its party members. From the perspective of party leaders, the Spanish war was a chance to systematically provide military, political, and organizational training to its base. They believed that this experience could bring up a generation of antifascist fighters to ride the wave of successful resistance into Germany. Whereas the war presented a logistical opportunity for the party organization, the individuals experienced a new, collective identity associated with the Spanish Civil War. Among mostly strangers, they found belonging and kinship thousands of miles from home.

The milieu that arose in Spain was unique for the KPD. It gave the party a new arena in which to exchange ideas, openly educate new recruits, and increase its rate of political training. All of these created an environment in which communists could not only gain experience fighting, they could also look to the front lines of the Spanish Civil War as a center of German communism. After the exiled KPD put out a call for all able-bodied antifascists to turn their attention to Spain in solidarity with the Spanish *Frente Popular*, communists hurried to join the crusade and reconvene with other political outlaws.<sup>30</sup> With substantial numbers of communists gathering in one place, the KPD was able to provide political, military, and officer training to the almost entirely working-class cohort.

This chapter analyzes the milieu—in other words, the social and cultural environment—of working-class Germans that developed in Spain between 1936 and 1939. First, it summarizes Klaus-Michael Mallmann’s study of left-proletarian milieus and their significance to identity formation among German workers. It then discusses the significance of the milieu in Spain, both for the party organization and for the volunteers themselves. Altogether, I aim to provide a holistic analysis of the German left in the Spanish Civil War. By bringing together the experiences of party officials and soldiers, this chapter sheds light on the community of German antifascists that arose in Spain. It argues that, during these years, the transplant community in Spain became the center of German antifascism and had important implications for both the party leadership and the broader movement.

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<sup>30</sup> Niemeyer, 42.

## *The Antifascist Community in Spain: An Experiment in Pluralism*

Though it became the center of antifascist resistance after 1936, Spain was not a popular country for German antifascist émigrés until its civil war began. For one thing, unlike France, the United Kingdom, or the Netherlands, it lacked an international cultural hub. Furthermore, Spain was not a country where German was widely spoken or understood, as it had relatively little historical connection and there was no large German presence there.<sup>31</sup> To compound this, about half of the country's population was illiterate, severely limiting its potential as a place of intellectual exchange for exiled leftists.<sup>32</sup> On top of these challenges, the country's economic conditions were horrendous. Still, the milieu that developed in Spain was in many ways a product of the roots that German settlers in Spain had planted. From the 1920s on, some German artists, writers, and intellectuals settled near the coasts and lived in small creative colonies, often on the islands of Mallorca and Ibiza.<sup>33</sup> Some high-profile Germans had thus established themselves in Spain before 1936, but these anecdotal instances did not amount to a large, influential community prior to the war.

The exception to the insignificant German community in Spain was Barcelona. The Catalan capital was home to the country's largest population of German émigrés and what most resembled a community. This was partly due to the fact that Barcelona was a center of European anarcho-syndicalism. It also was the most cosmopolitan and international of Spain's large cities. There were, however, several German leftists who had come to Barcelona prior to the civil war for another reason. In the summer of 1936, Spain was set to host the People's

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Zur Mühlen, pp. 33-34.



Olympiad, a sports tournament intended for antifascists to symbolically protest the 1936 Olympics held in Nazi Germany. The games were to take place in Barcelona, which had lost to Berlin in its bid to host the official Olympic games. After Barcelona failed to secure the bid, the *Frente Popular* government refused to take part in Berlin's Olympic Games, instead organizing its own event in the hopes that other countries would drop out. The People's Olympiad ultimately made a splash on the international stage, registering 6,000 athletes from 17 sovereign nations.<sup>34</sup> In addition to these countries, teams representing unrecognized nationalities and colonies attended.<sup>35</sup> Countries that had elected fascist dictatorships—like Germany and Italy—were represented by political exiles. Though its organizers cancelled the games just one day short of beginning due to the outbreak of the civil war (and heavy street fighting), thousands of athletes had already arrived in Barcelona, including the German team. Some of those German athletes, who had come to Spain in protest against their own government, stayed to become some of the first international defenders of the Spanish Republic even before the founding of the International Brigades.<sup>36</sup>

From the very first incarnation of the German International Brigades, the Spanish community of German antifascists was characterized by its partisan unity. By the end of the month, the KPD had sent Hans Beimler to serve as the party's representative in Spain, who essentially led a small cohort of Germans who had voluntarily come to join the war effort. He and a small group of KPD functionaries met in early August in Barcelona, where they formed the "Centuria Thälmann," a militia of mostly German volunteers that spanned the broad spectrum of antifascism. The Centuria Thälmann grew consistently. Karl Hoetzel, one of its first members,

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<sup>34</sup> Xavier Pujadas and Carles Santacana, "The Popular Olympic Games, Barcelona 1936: Olympians and Antifascists" in the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 27, no. 2 (1992), p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237 1/ 4.

recounted that by the third week of August, the amount of soldiers numbered 82.<sup>37</sup> By October, the group recorded 110 soldiers on a list of combatants.<sup>38</sup> Because it built upon the limited community of antifascists that had existed in Barcelona prior to the war, the militia was composed not only of communists and social democrats; it also included a large proportion of anarchists. As the International Brigades grew, solidarity continued to hold together these antifascists.

### ***From Above: The KPD Shapes the Niche Community in Spain***

The milieu in Spain provided an opportunity for the exiled KPD party organization—one that it welcomed after three years of political exile. Victory over the Spanish Nationalists was an attractive symbolic goal for the KPD party organization, as it was for all other communist parties. However, the party made efforts to shape the nature of the expat community by establishing its own institutions. Though the International Brigades evoke the image of transnationalism, the KPD party organization was interested in maintaining its important status within the German milieu and the larger German resistance movement.

The lack of KPD leadership posed great challenges to the fragmented party and had a profound effect on the new generation of German communists. In his article “La KPD y la Guerra Civil Española,” Alejandro Andreassi Cieri argues that the KPD’s precarious situation as an exiled party drove its leading executives to intervene so strongly in Spain.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to the party members of a few years prior, the new German communists were ill-trained politically and

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<sup>37</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237 13/ 207.

<sup>38</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237 1/ 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cieri, 181.

had little bureaucracy to adhere to. According to Ralf Niemeyer, “contrary to the consistently maintained claims of GDR historians that the KPD had never been without leadership, the actual lack of authorities in communist groups was documented by those in the ‘high places.’”<sup>40</sup> In effect, Spain would serve as a fresh start for the KPD to provide proper training to its functionaries: politically, bureaucratically, and militarily.

The chance to advance its training operations was one of the advantages the KPD saw in shaping the milieu in Spain. With its large presence of communist and socialist volunteers, the Spanish war gave the party a place to set up its own means of political, military, and ideological training without sending functionaries to the Soviet Union. Most of the KPD’s training took place in the few *Parteischule* (party schools) that the party had established in Spain. The first party school opened in Benicàssim, a small village south of Valencia and nestled between the Desert de les Palmes mountains to the West and the Mediterranean Sea to the East.

The school demonstrated the level of party involvement that the KPD established on the war front in Spain and its role in crafting the wartime experience of German volunteers. Its roster list shows that it served not only German communists, but also social democrats, suggesting it more broadly served the community of *Spanienkämpfer*. Specifically, the school carried four objectives, and all of these were indicative of the KPD’s structure and political ambitions. Its first function was to address the importance of the political delegates, commissars, and the character of the war, which allowed the party to frame the war from a communist perspective for its students. The second was to introduce the politics of the *Frente Popular* government, the tactics of winning the war, the goals of the fascist intervention, and the political operations in the

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<sup>40</sup> Niemeyer, 35. “Damit ist, entgegen der stets gepflegten Behauptung der DDR-Historiker, die illegale KPD sei je ohne Anleitung gewesen, die tatsächliche Führungslosigkeit der kommunistischen Gruppen von höchster Stelle dokumentiert.” Niemeyer is referring to statements made by Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov that the KPD was a party without leadership.

enemy camp. This served as political training. The tactics of war were something that communist émigrés were often sent to Moscow to study. Moreover, the achievement of a German *Volksfront* was one of the KPD's most pressing tasks. Third, the school aimed to provide a basic understanding of Spain's political and economic structure, as well as the origins and history of the Popular Front. The final objective was to bring an understanding of the recruits' home country into the context of the war in Spain, ensuring that the soldiers understood the domestic value of the war. The *Parteischule* was one of the primary ways in which the KPD shaped the character of the milieu from above.<sup>41</sup>

Despite Benicàssim's isolated location, the KPD's political commissar in Spain closely administered the school to ensure it was under party control. Every 14 days, the school's fulfillment of the above objectives was to be reviewed, along with more detailed aspects of the coursework. Namely, the political commissar would provide the school with a list of acceptable topics and push the course in the political direction of his choosing. This "political schoolwork" included (but was not limited to) an analysis of current events and developments occurring within the last review period.<sup>42</sup> To ensure efficiency, the school's administration had to guarantee that 9 students each week were ready for political schoolwork. Finally, the participants were reviewed through a "political exam" that measured the pupils' readiness to join the front. To earn a satisfactory grade, students needed to achieve a solid understanding of the Spanish Popular Front and the responsibilities and methods of political work in the International Brigades.<sup>43</sup> Using these methods of control, the KPD used the Spanish war as a chance to

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<sup>41</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 7, "Richtlinien, Ausarbeitungen und Lehrpläne für die politische und militärische Schulungsarbeit in den Brigaden:" p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 7: p.2

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

introduce a vigorous political training program and bring up another generation of party functionaries.

By shaping the community of German antifascists from above, the KPD was able to use the milieu in Spain to its advantage. It could provide military and political training to its base while also providing ideological education to volunteers in exile. Using the practical example of the Spanish Civil War, it brought its primary focus on popular front politics into the foreground of its educational efforts. The establishment of the niche community in Spain gave the KPD a chance to revitalize its base and play an active role in training antifascist resistance fighters.

In addition to the propaganda being distributed at the party school, the KPD ran an intense propaganda campaign to control the atmosphere in the communist camp. From its base in Paris, the senior leadership saw to the dissemination of brochures, flyers, and newspapers, delivering both war-related propaganda to Germany and KPD materials to representatives in Spain.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the party reached German communists in Spain through the XI. Brigade-published newspaper *Pasaremos*. The KPD ran much of its propaganda machine from a special office in Spain known as the *Deutsches Büro* (“German office”), which often compiled excerpts from the Spanish-language press and distributed them to the KPD base in Spain.<sup>45</sup> This way, the KPD could control and censor the information it distributed.

The result was that the KPD was able to control the narrative that German antifascists consumed. The press and propaganda that KPD functionaries closely administered constituted an important piece of the party’s political work. Not all of the KPD’s propaganda came directly from the Central Committee. Materials produced in Spain made their way to a party press office

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<sup>44</sup> Niemeyer, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

located in Paris, where KPD officers tweaked and edited publications before releasing them for distribution in Germany.<sup>46</sup> Because antifascist publications were outlawed in 1933, these KPD-influenced organs were some of the only news outlets that German antifascists had access to. The KPD's influential press and propaganda output gave it an important advantage in framing the war to German antifascists outside of Spain.

One of the most important functions of the press, from the KPD's perspective, was to connect the Spanish Civil War's emphasis on the popular front to the aspiration of unity in Germany.<sup>47</sup> The theme of *Volksfrontpolitik* ("popular front politics") appeared often in the various newspapers of the German International Brigades. The headlines of *Pasaremos* frequently reflected the objective of practical solidarity. In the March 8, 1938 issue of *Pasaremos*, two large headlines read "Einig für Spanien, Einig für Deutschland!" ("United for Spain, United for Germany!") and "Unser Bataillon marschiert im Geiste der Februarkämpfe" ("Our Battalion marches in the spirit of [Austria's freedom]").<sup>48</sup> As the next chapter examines, March 1938 was a critical time in which the niche community in Spain pushed for a united antifascist front against Hitler. As the question of the popular front was the most salient issue of the German left, the KPD attempted to frame the civil war from that perspective in its reports to Germans abroad.

As discussed at greater length in the next chapter, the KPD had resolved at the *Brüsseler Konferenz* ("Brussels Conference") in 1935 that achieving a united antifascist front with the SPD was its most urgent task. As such, its press organs in Spain took on the task of motivating and informing antifascists in exile by giving them an inside look at the dynamics of the Spanish

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<sup>46</sup> Niemeyer, 86.

<sup>47</sup> Niemeyer, 87-88.

<sup>48</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237/ 11/ 152.

Popular Front and the International Brigades. Regarding the influence that the KPD press network had, Niemeyer explains:

The communists played a decisive role in the drafting and editing of the newspapers, and the press of the International Brigades was subject to censorship. One could therefore argue that there was a press and propaganda monopoly in the International Brigades, especially given the scarcity of other contact between the soldiers and the outside world.<sup>49</sup>

However, as Niemeyer notes, the political task of showcasing the popular front's importance was not solely directed toward antifascists outside of Spain. Some of the communist *Spanienkämpfer* who came to the Spanish Republic's aid did not do so as proponents of the popular front, but rather to fight for the "Soviet Republic" of Spain.<sup>50</sup>

Through its control of education and propaganda, the KPD established itself as an important presence in the German niche community that arose in Spain. After the crisis that party leadership faced during the years of exile, the International Brigades presented an opportunity for the party to practically engage with its base, both within Spain and abroad.

### ***From Below: The Wider Antifascist Presence***

#### ***The Niche Community in Spain***

Klaus-Michael Mallmann has contributed greatly to our understanding of the KPD in a domestic context by retelling the party's history from the bottom up. His study of the various milieus in which ordinary working-class Germans interacted shed light on the ways that space and environment contributed to the development of communist ideology. Mallmann's research focused on the era of the Weimar Republic, between the end of the Great War and the election of

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<sup>49</sup> Niemeyer, 87-88.

<sup>50</sup> Niemeyer, 87.

the Nazis in 1933. When applied to the German presence in the International Brigades, however, Mallmann's research aptly characterizes the Spanish Civil War's role in identity-formation and cultural exchange. This highlights another aspect in which the war shaped the antifascist struggle. It is through the lens of this milieu that this section examines the *Spanienkämpfer*.

In *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik*, Mallmann delved into the social environments associated with the German working class. Mallmann studied these environments as "left-proletarian milieus" in which working-class communities lived. These milieus could comprise easily-defined environments—family units, workplaces, or neighborhoods—but also more abstract circles where some of those environments intersected. Some examples include unions or even religious organizations. Far from the party elites, which were centered primarily in Berlin and Moscow, these "niche communities" of idea exchange and social interaction were Mallmann's focus in studying the development of German communism from below.

#### *The Growth of the Niche Community*

Based on Mallmann's concept, the International Brigades served as a left-proletarian milieu that impacted German resistance from below as well as above. While the KPD party organization focused on regaining power and influence, volunteers from below sought to regain morale by revitalizing the antifascist movement. The men and women volunteering their lives had become soldiers upon their arrival in Albacete, but until then had been low-wage workers, writers, and journalists, as well as serving other civilian roles. The German antifascist community in Spain became a milieu in which these workers-turned-soldiers, as intellectuals, could interact with one another. The setting of the milieu also played an important role. Rather than taking place in a society where antifascist sentiment was punishable by imprisonment and execution, the milieu existed under a system curated by the Comintern, the Spanish Republic,



and the thousands of leftist volunteers who had taken part in organizing it. Ultimately, Germans in the International Brigades encompassed a unique milieu in which they could engage with their exiled party in the new epicenter of global antifascist resistance.

The intersection of these factors demonstrates the importance of the niche community. The relatively small population of émigrés in Spain allowed for cultural exchange and interaction since even before the war. Germans who took part in organizations in Barcelona worked to improve the leftist cultural scene in Spain, hoping to bring art and theater to Berlin's level.<sup>51</sup> However, the Spanish Civil War changed the nature of the German transplant community. Most engaged in supporting the Republican government against the Nationalists, seeing the intersection between their anti-Hitler resistance and Spain's *Frente Popular*. Doctors, journalists, engineers, and actors volunteered in combat, but also in cultural campaigns.

These cultural activities took many forms, but they all centered on the milieu. One such event, as detailed in an April 1937 article in *Pasaremos*, was a birthday celebration for the mostly German Thälmann Battalion's namesake: the imprisoned KPD leader Ernst Thälmann. The Battalion invited the children from a nearby village for coffee and biscuits to explain their cause in Spain and their efforts toward Thälmann's eventual freedom.<sup>52</sup> In an example that took place away from the front, the German antifascist club of Barcelona became something of a community center for the International Brigadiers. It established a concert hall, library, and classroom where German antifascists could gather for community engagement.<sup>53</sup> This included cultural events, such as theater and musical shows, but also ways of engaging within the antifascist milieu. Spanish allies came for conversation groups to help Germans learn their

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<sup>51</sup> Palmier, 163.

<sup>52</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237/ 11/ 152.

<sup>53</sup> Palmier, 163.

language, and injured soldiers came for support and company.<sup>54</sup> Some German antifascists in Barcelona and Madrid, in conjunction with KPD functionaries, set up a radio station in early 1937. The purpose of the station was to communicate news on the war effort, as well as interesting events and conversations taking place within the Brigades. The *Deutscher Freiheitssender 29,8* (“German Freedom Station 29.8”) communicated extensively with German antifascists abroad. It increased the cultural value of the niche community in Spain by playing lectures from antifascist writers, delivering courses on topics in social history, and allowing émigrés to voice themselves using media outlets largely unavailable in exile.<sup>55</sup>

All three of these examples demonstrate a level of revitalization among German antifascists. The presence of antifascists had been largely scattered prior to the Spanish Civil War, with anti-Nazi émigrés and exiles scattered in small groupings throughout Europe. In some ways, one can view the niche community in Spain as a continuation of the German exile population in Paris. Its political diversity and emphasis on popular front formation are reminiscent of the years between 1933 and 1935 in Paris, when dedicated antifascists fled the Reich to pursue their resistance in exile. After the summer of 1936, however, Paris was no longer the center of global antifascism. John Cornford, a British poet who later fell on the front lines of the Battle of Lopera, recalled his impressions upon entering Barcelona in 1936:

In Barcelona one can understand physically what the dictatorship of the proletariat means. All the fascist press has been taken over. The real rule is in the hands of the militias. There is a real terror against the fascists. But that doesn’t alter the fact that the place is free—and conscious all the time of its freedom.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Palmier, 164. For a more detailed analysis of the *Freiheitssender*, see Pütter and Loewy, *Rundfunk gegen das “Dritte Reich:” Deutschsprachige Rundfunkaktivitäten im Exil, 1933-1945*.

<sup>56</sup> Norman Page, *The Thirties in Britain: Context and Commentary* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1990), p. 91.

Foreigners marveled at how palpable antifascist sentiment was in Spain. For Germans, the rejuvenated community within the International Brigades was important in gaining morale.

### *Transplants Within the Transnational Community*

As the Spanish Civil War was rooted in worldwide solidarity, existing literature often (and rightly) characterizes the International Brigades as a transnational community—one that blurred the boundaries between nationalities in pursuit of a common goal.<sup>57</sup> What the literature focuses less on, however, are the dynamics of the transplant community that arose in Spain during the war. This community was the result of a combination of top-down and bottom-up efforts. Seeing the war's importance to their cause, individuals on the bottom formed a circle of exiles in Spain that could play an active role in the German resistance. By establishing various institutions, the KPD party organization was active in shaping this clique from the top.

It is important to consider the German niche community in Spain to understand the war's impact on German antifascism. Of course, the International Brigades as a whole served as a transnational community—that is, their common space, characteristics, and goals transcended nationality. However, the left-proletarian milieu that existed within the Brigades was unique in the exile period. There was no other place where antifascists could meaningfully assemble while also fighting on the front lines against Hitler and his allies.

Overall, the niche community that grew in Spain offered the promise of revitalization to antifascists at all levels of power. The hopeful momentum that stemmed from the Spanish Civil War helped to reignite one of the German left's most pressing debates: the formation of a united

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<sup>57</sup> See earlier footnote on the literature focusing on internationalism in the Spanish Civil War.

front. From 1936 to 1938, the community of exiles in Spain became the center of attention for those who hoped for popular-front unity against Nazism.

## IV. The United Party

### *The Popular Front from Below*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the niche community in Spain served as a meeting place for German antifascist exiles. It played an important role in antifascist continuity and identity formation, but it also had effects on the political realm. The presence of Germans defending the Spanish Republic meant that communists and social democrats fought in the same ranks and for the same cause. When the war began in the summer of 1936, Hitler had been in power for three years already and no real advancement toward a united antifascist front had materialized among party leaders. At a time when social democrats saw Stalin as a threat to German sovereignty and communists referred to their counterparts as *sozialfaschisten* (“social fascists”), the active collaboration and solidarity between the *Spanienkämpfer* tell us a different story from what occurred at the party executive level.

The volunteer soldiers held as a point of pride and purpose the achievement of an *Einheitsfront von unten* (united front from below). As the war progressed, the formation of a comprehensive united front against the Nazi regime became an increasingly stronger demand from the antifascists stationed in Spain, whether volunteers or party functionaries. These antifascists hoped that their unity from below would lead to an official popular front, created from the bottom-up. Such an endeavor would put the relationship between Germany’s major anti-Nazi parties, the KPD and SPD, to the test. By the time the Spanish Civil War began, there had already been over three years’ worth of attempts at uniting the parties. However, as the center of German resistance shifted to Spain, those on the ground breathed new life into the movement that had seemingly fallen through.

## *The Status of Unity in Exile*

Even before the exile of all political parties other than the Nazi party, many antifascists expressed their concern that uniting in a popular front would be the only way to topple the Nazi regime. However, though the German left may have shared a hatred of fascism and a high esteem for the working class, its two main parties held disdain toward each other. Particularly contentious was the question of Germany's government after the Nazis' desired fall. The SPD, which was the Reichstag's leading party throughout the Weimar era, promoted participation in the existing political system. It rejected the radical positions and anti-establishment stance characteristic of the KPD. For their part, German communists had been actively labeling social democracy "social fascism" since the KPD's shift toward Stalinism in 1928.<sup>58</sup> The term, which Stalin coined in 1924, presented social democracy as an obstacle to a Bolshevik-style working class revolution, making it an easy target of communist smear campaigns. The KPD's influence from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union undoubtedly contributed to party rhetoric that social democracy was the greatest threat to the working class.

The KPD and SPD remained lost in their fundamental contradictions. The unforeseen consequence was that both parties lost sight of the threat of Nazism. Even when it was clear that Hitler would win a plurality of votes in the 1933 Reichstag election, many communists and social democrats alike believed Hitler's win would be an asset. In their view, letting Hitler take power would inevitably convince the people that Nazism was based on empty promises, and that

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<sup>58</sup> Lea Haro, "Entering a Theoretical Void: The Theory of Social Fascism and Stalinism in the German Communist Party" in *Critique* 39, no. 4 (2011): 563–82.

soon after a left-wing government would ensure. Stalin himself was willing to bet that the Nazi regime would collapse.<sup>59</sup>

If a united front between the KPD and SPD seemed like a capitulation before 1933, its importance became clear to leftists after Hitler's electoral victory. However, pursuing an *Einheitsfront* would require a reversal of the parties' mutual antagonization of the other as a threat to democracy. Party leaders would also have to contradict their own ideals. The SPD leadership faced the dilemma of siding with one dictator over another. The KPD's Central Committee understood that promoting unity and the "social fascists" as friends of the working class would set a dangerous precedent. Nonetheless, the parties made at least nominal attempts to come together against the Nazi regime. The Central Committee of the KPD approved several resolutions after 1932 emphasizing the need for immediate unity.<sup>60</sup> However, despite several closed-door meetings, the KPD continued its attacks on the social democrats and the SPD consistently rejected communist advances toward unity. As this chapter goes on to explain, the KPD nonetheless rode the wave of growing bipartisan support for a united front, hoping that even without official party cooperation, it could still achieve the *Einheitsfront* from below.<sup>61</sup>

Among the first of the aforementioned top-down resolutions was one put forth on March 14, 1933, nine days prior to the Enabling Act that gave Hitler the power to act without the Reichstag's approval. The message the Central Committee directed to the SPD was one of togetherness against the common enemy, expressing the urgency of their shared situation:

The leader of our party, Comrade Ernst Thälmann, as well as the leader of the Social Democratic Party, but most especially thousands of communist and social democratic workers, have been sent to prisons of fascist terror. All communist newspapers and even a large portion of social democratic newspapers have been outlawed. Labor unions and

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<sup>59</sup> John Fotheringham, "From 'Einheitsfront' to 'Volksfront': Ernst Toller and the Spanish Civil War" in *German Life and Letters* 52, no. 4 (1999): 430–42, p. 433.

<sup>60</sup> "Dokumente der ZK des KPD 1933-1945," Verlag Olga Benario und Herbert Braun, PDF.

<sup>61</sup> Palmier, 346.

workers' tenements have been stormed and demolished by fascists. Shootings of workers 'on the run' have already begun to take place on a larger scale. Through these means of terror, the [Hitler regime] is attempting to gag the working masses to advance its program of big capital against the working masses.<sup>62</sup>

This *Einheitsfrontangebot* ("offer of unity") to the social democrats is an early testament to the KPD's stated goal of eventual consolidation among the left. Unlike in later resolutions, after parties other than the NSDAP had been outlawed and Hitler had established himself a dictator, the party's message was not militant. Instead, it makes a case for unity as a political solution to overthrow the Nazi regime.

Within a few years, the *Einheitsfront* evolved from a hopeful aspiration into a crucial necessity. The Central Committee's resolution of January 30, 1935 referred to the *Einheitsfront* as "the most important tool in the development of mass action..."<sup>63</sup> By this time, popular-front politics had also become Stalin's priority as he sought to unite all antifascists against Nazi Germany, and this was reflected in the KPD's strategy throughout the following years. At the *Brusseler Konferenz*, the first meeting of KPD officials since their outlawing in 1933, the Central Committee laid out its full support of an *Einheitsfront* between the party executives. Rather than reversing its rhetoric that social democracy was equivalent to fascism, the party distinguished between the socialist roots of the SPD and what it labeled a "reactionary wing."<sup>64</sup> However, the Central Committee's first attempts at reaching an agreement with their social democratic companions in exile were discouraging. On November 23, 1935, Walter Ulbricht and Franz Dahlem traveled to Prague to make a plea to the *Vorstand*, the SPD's inner circle of exiled leaders, hoping to convince SPD delegates Friedrich Stampfer and Hans Vogel to agree on the terms of cooperation. While KPD leaders embraced unity from above, the SPD was adamant that

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<sup>62</sup> "Einheitsfrontangebot der KP. Deutschlands" in "Dokumente der ZK des KPD 1933-1945," p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> "ZK Resolution 30.1.1935" in "Dokumente der ZK des KPD 1933-1945," p. 193.

<sup>64</sup> Palmier, 345.



an *Einheitsfront* could not be forced upon constituents. Essentially, the only way toward unity would be to consolidate polarized constituencies, and this could only be done if the KPD renounced its extremist and revolutionary practices. Unsurprisingly, the talks ended without an agreement. The SPD's response, however, foreshadowed the idea of the united front from below.

The most notable attempts at a united front at the executive level took place in 1935 in Paris, resulting largely from the niche society created there in exile. A center of antifascist resistance, the French capital was home to the most communists in exile outside of the Soviet Union. On the heels of the French *Fronte Populaire*'s recent establishment, and in the company of thousands of leftist intellectuals, Paris seemed a likely place for the Reich's most important political exiles to reach an agreement. Advocates of the popular front in both the communist and social democratic camps gathered delegates to meet at the prominent Hôtel Lutetia, which lent its name to the group.

The *Lutetia-Kreis* (Lutetia Circle), as it came to be known, brought the two parties at least into nominal cooperation toward a united front. In 1936, the organization began to circulate its own publication, *Deutsche Informationen*, which featured articles and texts written by leftist authors of various party affiliations. The *Lutetia-Kreis* was able to agree on relatively basic measures opposing Hitler's militancy and undermining of democracy. Still, most KPD and SPD executives remained in different worlds ideologically, despite broad support for the popular front among communist and social democratic exiles living in Paris and abroad. For one thing, the Central Committee and the *Vorstand* still could not reach a consensus on what form German government should take after Hitler's defeat. The SPD remained apprehensive in allying itself directly with a Stalinist party, and the KPD refused to give up its bitter antagonism toward

Trotskyists, its support for Stalin's purges and trials, and its revolutionary methods.<sup>65</sup> The *Lutetia-Kreis* stalled not long after it began, and by 1938 it had already lost its momentum as many writers stopped contributing to *Deutsche Informationen* and some of its most influential members left. Though it inspired genuine hope in many exiled antifascists, it showed that the SPD feared a Soviet Germany as much as it did a Nazi Germany, and that the leaders of both leftist parties failed to capitalize on the excitement with which many exiles viewed the *Einheitsfront*. It also proved to German antifascists living in exile that, contrary to the lofty efforts of their party officials, unity would likely have to emerge from below.

### ***Unity from Below in the International Brigades***

As the SPD delegates put forth in their response to the offer of unity, parties could not change constituencies. In other words, the united front could not come into existence from the top-down. There were still important challenges that prevented the *Einheitsfront* from materializing at the executive level, and the anti-Nazi niche community in Spain realized that the experience of *de facto* unity could reignite the possibility of political unity. It solidified the relationship between communists and social democrats as one of common goals rather than political rivalry. Though there had been talks toward establishing such a union before the civil war, even the most hopeful of these attempts resulted only in basic agreement against Hitler's actions. In Spain, however, unity was not merely an imagination; it was the reality on the ground. Though the *Einheitsfront* from above would not be won so easily, unity from below was an

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<sup>65</sup> Palmier, 349.

important part of the International Brigades. This experience drove bottom-up efforts to unite the parties and inspired hope that the Nazis could be forced out of power.

### *Reigniting the Push for Unity*

The first major initiative from communists and social democrats in Spain came in 1937, after a year and a half of active cooperation during the civil war. In December, a bipartisan group of German antifascists wrote to the leadership of both the SPD and the KPD.<sup>66</sup> Their letter detailed a discussion between German social democrats and communists that took place in Albacete. The authors eagerly explained that the meeting resulted in the establishment of a committee, which had drafted a series of terms for collaboration between the two camps. To convey confidence and urgency, the authors concluded the memo by requesting that the recipients pass the enclosed guidelines to all social democrats within contact and formulate a joint response. The same message was distributed to various participants and groups associated with German antifascists, in the hopes that the various communities in Paris, Prague, and elsewhere in exile would help push for the success of unity.

However, mirroring previous attempts at uniting the parties, the cleavages between party functionaries ultimately challenged this effort. This time, rather than the SPD standing in the way of the committee's approval, it was the KPD. Upon receiving the message from Albacete, Karl Mewis, the KPD's political commissar in Spain, sent a scathing rejection of the committee's attempt at unity to Ernst Blank, a founding member of the committee who ironically would later become the 11<sup>th</sup> International Brigade's last political commissar in 1939. But with Mewis as the

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<sup>66</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 9: "Einheits- und Volksfront in Spanien," p. 3.

political leader of the German Brigade, lack of support arose primarily out of political and bureaucratic concerns.

The three issues Mewis identified in his letter provide illuminating insight into the challenges of the popular front. Mewis' first complaint was that the committee had delegated Ernst Braun to represent the German social democratic volunteers. According to Mewis, Braun's political alignment was "very unclear."<sup>67</sup> Allowing him to represent the SPD in a symbolic unification would therefore be a dangerous political move for the KPD. Mewis' second issue was that the SPD's representation should not appoint itself. Rather, the KPD would need time to monitor the committee's actions and determine a representation that it could deem acceptable. Finally, Mewis stressed that the committee would not end the distrust between the KPD and the SPD:

Do you really think your unity committee will make more of an impression [to the SPD leadership] in Prague if you claim yourselves as representatives of all the KPD and SPD affiliates in Spain? The executives in Prague are well aware that this is not accurate and thus will easily maneuver [these efforts]. The effect of our attempts to thwart [the SPD] will be greater if we have committees in various locations and the appropriate groundwork is laid before biting off more than we can chew.<sup>68</sup>

Mewis' reservations were rooted in his belief that the committee was not representative of the political reality outside of Spain. Because the KPD and the SPD had already established themselves in two distinct political contexts, it was unrealistic to expect that this event would change the nature of their broader relationship. Further, it would not be worth pursuing should it undermine the KPD's image and damage future attempts at a united front. All of these concerns point to the fear of losing control—a characteristic typical of communist parties operating under

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<sup>67</sup> It is possible that Mewis was insinuating a lack of transparency on Braun's part, rather than a lack of clarity. Either way, there would be risky implications for the Comintern-affiliated KPD should it recognize him as a leader of an allied party.

<sup>68</sup> SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, V 237/ 1/ 13 in Niemeyer, pp. 135-137.

the supervision of the Comintern. The KPD's Central Committee demonstrated that it would only pursue any steps toward unity on its own terms to avoid sending mixed signals to the SPD.

These challenges did not deter the milieu of German antifascist comrades on Spanish soil. On March 13, 1938, the most substantial step toward unity taken from above in Spain arose when a committee of thirteen communist and nine socialist delegates convened in Valencia, bringing with them the goal of forming a comprehensive, politically viable path toward a united front.<sup>69</sup> The conference was spearheaded by German volunteers in the 11<sup>th</sup> International Brigade. In a schedule included on the invitation to Valencia Conference, three primary items appeared on the agenda. The first reemphasized that unity is the only way toward victory against fascism.<sup>70</sup> The second task was to discuss the significance of victory over Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini in the context of the fight for the German masses.<sup>71</sup> The third point, as a solution to the KPD's rejection of the Albacete Committee, was to convene a group of 35 Spanish delegates who would be tasked with the election of a German *Einheitskomitee* ("unity committee").<sup>72</sup> This way, the representation of the social democrats would not be self-selected, but rather by the delegates of the Spanish Communist Party's Central Committee.

Though the attempt was more thorough and perhaps more satisfactory from a political standpoint, it met a quicker end than its predecessor in Albacete. Of the 35 Spanish delegates expected to participate, only 22 attended, forcing the conference to take place without its stated intention of reforming a committee. Instead, the conference shifted its focus toward writing to the various party leadership and antifascist circles.<sup>73</sup> The delegates at the conference also drafted

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<sup>69</sup> It is probably coincidental that this conference took place one day after Germany's annexation of Austria. However, as Hitler's *Kriegspolitik* (politics of war) became clearer from 1936-1939, antifascists responded by pushing the popular front with more urgency at the grassroots level.

<sup>70</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/ V 237 1/12: "Aus dem Schlusswort von Fritz," pp. 45-47.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Niemeyer, 144.

the “Valencia Manifesto”, the final call to German antifascists for solidarity with the Spanish Republic and the united front. In failing to effectively establish unity between the SPD and KPD leadership in the context of the Spanish Civil War, the conference represented another political failure in the progress toward a united front despite popular support from those fighting for solidarity in Spain.

### *Failure in Politics, Success in Practice?*

If one were to review the push for a united front from a top-down approach, it would appear as a failure. Indeed, neither the Albacete Committee nor the Valencia Conference succeeded in bringing the leadership of the two parties together in the Spanish struggle. However, viewing the united front in Spain as moot misrepresents the reality of German antifascists in the International Brigades. This oversimplified narrative is a testament to the way in which neglecting the bottom of the political hierarchy colors the assessment of history. Looking to the experiences of communists and social democrats on the ground in Spain, it becomes clear that antifascists collaborated with those of different parties to a closer and more profound degree than they had before. In doing so, the unified goal of furthering domestic German resistance proved more important to *Spanienkämpfer* than the points of disagreement between the party executives in Paris and Prague.

Looking away from individual committees and conferences, accounts from KPD members in Spain, both at the top and the bottom of the political hierarchy, suggest that communists and social democrats on the ground in Spain and in Germany became more supportive of the united front, both from above and below. The guidelines of the KPD *Parteischule* give an indication of how the importance of unity encompassed both the top and

bottom layers of the KPD. The *Parteischule*, which KPD career politicians had organized, emphasized in its charter the dire importance of popular front politics.<sup>74</sup> To do this, the curriculum placed the role of unity in Spain in the larger historical context of the united front as an antifascist aspiration. Among the educational material of the *Parteischule* is a document accompanying a lesson on leftist unity. The lesson plan, titled *Die Einheitspartei* (“The United Party”), underscores “the desire of the masses for unity” and that “the unification of the Communist and Socialist Parties is the most urgent task at this moment.”<sup>75</sup> Further, part of the educational material included on-the-ground reports of how workers in an array of German cities followed and discussed the Spanish war effort. The reports, documenting sentiment in Berlin, Nuremberg, Oldenburg, Düsseldorf, and Breslau, all underscored the hope of German antifascists that the experience of unity in Spain would translate to the domestic situation.<sup>76</sup>

The *Parteischule* seems to have successfully conveyed the importance of the united front to its students, who represented the working-class ‘bottom’ of the party. In a September 1937 letter addressed to senior KPD officials Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht, students who had recently completed the training program offered praise and insight into what they had learned. “Central to our schoolwork were the tasks of the united and popular front in the Spanish [Civil War], the task of deepening and broadening the unity among all antifascist forces, and especially the role of our heroic and great Communist Party of Spain, which is the leading power of the country.”<sup>77</sup> The letter illustrates the important role that coalition building played in the context of the Spanish Civil War. “For us, the fight in Spain is a vocational school in the politics of the

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<sup>74</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 7: „Schulungsmaterial,“ p. 97.

<sup>75</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 7: „Die Einheitspartei,“ p. 48

<sup>76</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 7: “Brief der Schüler der ersten deutschen Parteischule in Spanien,“ p. 93.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

united and popular front.”<sup>78</sup> As the writers indicated, antifascists in Spain realized through firsthand experience that victory would be impossible without cooperation. However, the letter is punctuated with propaganda, which exemplifies the reasons the SPD was reluctant to build a united coalition with the KPD. For example, it regurgitates the vitriolic antagonization of Trotskyists as “agents of Hitler” from which the SPD *Vorstand* distanced itself.<sup>79</sup>

Social democrats of the International Brigades also expressed their support for unity. In a letter sent to the SPD leadership in Prague in November 1937, one month before the Albacete Conference, social democrat and volunteer soldier Salo Glogowski outlined the partisan dynamics of the German brigades. He lamented that German social democrats were underrepresented in Spain but explained that they shared the same fight as communists and socialists—that of German antifascists against the Nazi state.<sup>80</sup> Glogowski then detailed how the fighters on the ground saw the role of unity in their domestic struggle. “The Italian Socialist Party works together with the Communist Party of Italy in the fight against Mussolini, so we wonder why the leadership of the SPD does not work in cooperation with the Central Committee of the KPD to help our brave, outlawed comrades in Germany and begin taking collective action.”<sup>81</sup> At the close of his letter, Glogowski states that there is no future for the German resistance movement without active collaboration. He even accuses the party of “sectarian politics” for not agreeing on a common ground with the KPD at the executive level, referring to the obstacles delaying progress toward a united front as *Kleinkram* (“small stuff”).<sup>82</sup> Glogowski’s message shows the discontent that *Spanienkämpfer* felt after hoping to model a

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

<sup>80</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 11/ V 237/ 1/ 9: “Einheits- und Volksfront in Spanien.”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



future united coalition on the experiences of solidarity during the Spanish Civil War. At the end of his letter, Glogowski confidently predicted that a united front would arise. However, his remark about sectarianism would continue to more accurately characterize the *Einheitsfront* in the years to come.

The situation in Spain did have a noticeable effect on how the *Einheitsfront* manifested itself in KPD politics. As the war in Spain raged on and the future became ever bleaker for antifascists, the political united front between the KPD and SPD never took shape. But on the first day of the Valencia Conference, Karl Mewis, now the XI. Brigade's political commissar, delivered a powerful speech on the lasting impact that the pursuit of unity would have. He expressed that the solidarity practiced in Spain had set a precedent that would reach the leadership of the parties. As Mewis indicated, one can identify differences in the party's attitude toward unity over the course of the Spanish Civil War. Niemeyer notes that, although it was communists who had largely organized and attended the conference, the materials published at the Valencia conference were more "palatable" to recipients than prior messages.<sup>83</sup> This meant that there was no communist propaganda, no allusions to a "Red Spain", and no targeted attacks at the leadership of the SPD.<sup>84</sup> Niemeyer suggests that the material deliberately avoided polemical rhetoric, attesting to its commitment to the united front over its strained political relationship. Further, the Central Committee's attitude toward unity seems to have softened after years of pressure from the *Spanienkämpfer*. Niemeyer's analysis shows that, in the years following the Spanish Civil War, the united front was discussed in a more open and conciliatory fashion.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Niemeyer, 145.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

## *Conclusion*

When the KPD officially agreed that fascism was the greatest enemy of the working class, it laid the groundwork for an eventual cooperation with the social democrats. The two parties had major points of contention. Among these were the tactics that each party preferred, the fear of losing control over their constituencies, and the strategy of organizing a united front under exile. But above all, the fundamental disagreement over Germany's future political orientation loomed over the process of building a coalition throughout the 1930s. After years of robust but ineffective belief in a united, popular front, the cooperation of German communists and social democrats in Spain revitalized the hope that a popular front could arise. Despite sincere attempts on the ground to make real progress toward the *Einheitsfront* as an official political union, strategic fears and logistical issues continued to get in the way.

Still, despite the political failures of building an antifascist united front at the executive level, the experience of *Spanienkämpfer* from the bottom up reveals that unity was effectively achieved at the grassroots level. The union of communists and social democrats manifested itself in the military training, community-building, and common goals of the men and women sacrificing themselves for the Spanish Republic. By writing to their party officials, organizing unity conferences, and fighting for the same antifascist ideals, the Germans of the International Brigades are a window into the reality of the *Einheitsfront* from below as it existed in a Spanish context.

Though it did not succeed in reaching unity at the executive level, the impact of the unity between communists and social democrats was felt by KPD functionaries, whose approach to the *Einheitsfront* became more conciliatory than it had been in previous discussions. To say that the

Spanish Civil War was a failure in achieving a united front between communists and social democrats reflects an oversimplified narrative. It considers unity only from the top down, whereas successful unity was not only existent among German antifascists, but tangible enough that those in Spain consistently used their experiences as a rallying cry in communicating with their party officials. Ultimately, this would not persuade the executive levels to follow suit. However, from the bottom up, the united front was actively leading the fight against European fascism.

## V. Epilogue

“There are certain events in life that one never forgets.”<sup>86</sup> So began Albert Giebel’s recollection of the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. A dedicated resistance fighter, Giebel served on the front lines, rose to the rank of lieutenant, and even got married in Spain. He remained hopeful until September 1938, when Franco’s forces effectively gained control over Catalonia. The loss of connection between the Republican armies there and in Madrid signaled the long, painful end of the war. In the next seven months, as Madrid lay under siege and the Republic’s fall was imminent, the International Brigades disbanded officially. Survivors of the Brigades returned to their countries of origin. For German fighters like Albert Giebel, though, there was no home to return to. Many of the demoralized volunteers ended up in prison camps, where they often waited in transit before entering concentration camps.<sup>87</sup> Nazi forces captured Giebel in France during the occupation, whisking him between camps until his final destination at the Neuengamme concentration camp in Hamburg. Giebel was luckier than others. While out in the work yard, another inmate approached Giebel. “Is that you, Albert?” As luck would have it, a fellow *Spanienkämpfer* by the name of Fritz Perlitz was also interned at Neuengamme. The two managed to survive torture, malnourishment, and air attacks, remaining close friends for the remainder of their lives.

This story, featured in an East German collection of memoirs, strikes me for two reasons. Firstly, it brings to life the harsh reality that extinguished the hope of the Spanish Civil War. The

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<sup>86</sup> LArch Berlin, C Rep. 902-02-05 (Nr. 83).

<sup>87</sup> The camp that held the most Spanish Civil War veterans was the Gurs internment camp in southern France, initially established to control the number of Spanish refugees crossing the border. For further information, see Scott Soo, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War Refugees, 1939-2009* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

*Spanienkämpfer*, after establishing a vibrant antifascist transplant community and engaging in popular-front politics, in many cases lived their postwar days in German concentration camps. Others, like Georg Heinzmann, were unable to make it out of Spain when the war ended. These prisoners were caught by Franco's forces and taken to Spanish prison camps, where Nationalists treated them especially poorly for having intervened on the wrong side. Giebel's story is also a window into the community of German volunteers as it existed after the civil war. He wrote that, of all the political prisoners in the camp, the *Spanienkämpfer* had it worst. The camp's wardens repeatedly targeted the group, singling them out from the others, for special work assignments. On the whole, the band of former volunteers stuck together and often kept each other alive.

After their defeat, *Spanienkämpfer* were targets not only of fascism, but also of Stalinism. zur Mühlen notes that, during the postwar show trials and 'cleansing' of communist politicians from 1948 to 1951, Spanish Civil War veterans were disproportionately sentenced.<sup>88</sup> One possible explanation is that Stalin did not consider them 'loyal' communists. Because of its multi-party unity, Stalin may have brushed off the community of former volunteers as undedicated communists. As witnesses of the events in Spain, they were also potentially aware of the flaws in Stalinist politics. Moreover, the substantial proportion of Jewish *Spanienkämpfer* was susceptible to Stalinist anti-Semitism.<sup>89</sup>

Despite their initial persecution, the *Spanienkämpfer* held a special place in East German society. They were honored as an important part of the history of antifascist resistance. East Germans celebrated the anniversaries of the war officially and named streets, public squares, and even warships after veterans. Beginning in 1956, the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity

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<sup>88</sup> Zur Mühlen, 268.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Party (SED) awarded the Hans Beimler medal to former *Spanienkämpfer*, named after the head of the Centuria Thälmann and first commissar of the International Brigades. Beimler's face also appeared on stamps and was immortalized in a statue built in Rostock. The *Spanienkämpfer* received commemoration in form of a large statue in East Berlin's Volkspark Friedrichshain. The memory of the veterans within the GDR is a broad topic in itself, but these physical manifestations of tribute illustrate the important role that they played in the history of German left-wing, popular-front politics. Essentially, the memory of the *Spanienkämpfer* was a symbol not only of East Germany's past, but also of its present.<sup>90</sup>

Scholarship has often overlooked the important role that the Spanish Civil War played in the German antifascist community. As the German antifascist community struggled to find methods of meaningful resistance during the mid to late 1930s after the exile of political parties, the Spanish Civil War represented a promising opportunity. Realizing the intersection of the two antifascist resistance movements, the German left's attention shifted to Spain. The niche community of German leftists continued to grow throughout the years of the Spanish Civil War, amassing writers, artists, and intellectuals-turned-political émigrés. Here, German antifascists could engage with a wider social milieu while playing an active role in the fight against European fascism. From the KPD Central Committee's perspective, the International Brigades provided a chance to recover influence on German communists, both within the Reich and in exile. In this niche community, the pursuit of unity between anti-Nazi parties quickly became an urgent priority, driving a push for party action from below and inspiring cooperation at the

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<sup>90</sup> On the memory of the Spanish Civil War in East Germany, see Josie McLellan.

grassroots level. Though the attempts at unifying anti-Nazi parties failed, antifascists in Spain revitalized the movement and demonstrated the possibility of popular-front unity.

Resistance to Nazism was scarce within German borders, and those who were most dedicated to the antifascist cause left their country. As Fritz Perlitz commented in his memoir: “‘Yeah,’ we often heard, ‘I would have taken part, too, but there was no way to know how we were supposed to get there.’ It makes it sound like we went to the police, picked up our passports, got a ticket from Berlin to Madrid, and then took off. It wasn’t like that.”<sup>91</sup> Recalling Karl Hoetzel’s tale of arriving in Spain, devoted antifascists did not make it to their battleground easily. They embarked on dedicated journeys that reflected the urgency of their cause. The story of the *Spanienkämpfer* shows that, to German resistance fighters, Spain’s struggle was their own.

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<sup>91</sup> LArch Berlin, C Rep. 902-02-05 (Nr. 83).

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